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Approved For Release 2002/05/02 : CIA-RDP85-00671R000300070003-1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

*Research
Memorandum*

RAI 20 October 27, 1967

To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *Thomas L. Hughes*
Subject: Bolivia and the Guerrilla Experience

For almost a year Bolivia has been the target of one of Latin America's seemingly most professional communist guerrilla movements under the leadership of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The initial success and the final defeat of the insurrection provides a test history of the Castro-Debray-Guevara thesis of rural revolution. This memorandum describes and analyzes the history of the movement, the reasons for its failure and the effect of the experience on Bolivia.

ABSTRACT

For geographical, sociological, and political reasons, Bolivia would appear to offer an ideal setting for a communist guerrilla movement. A very low standard of living, a tradition of political instability, and a potential as a base of operations against neighboring countries, made Bolivia a particularly tempting target for Argentine revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and his Cuban and Bolivian followers.

The guerrillas settled in the sparsely populated southeastern part of the country to begin training and reconnaissance in late 1966, but hard evidence of their existence and potential threat did not appear until March, when a Bolivian army patrol stumbled upon the group and was quickly defeated. In the following few months, other clashes between the ill-trained, ill-equipped

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Bolivian army and the guerrillas proved disastrous for the government forces. Concern within the Bolivian Government and among Bolivia's neighbors grew, and the Bolivian Government requested US training and material assistance. The insurrection gained international attention with the capture of French marxist Jules Regis Debray and the growing evidence that Guevara was leading the band.

By July, however, the situation had begun to improve as the Bolivian soldiers held their ground instead of fleeing in the face of the guerrillas. Captured documents and other evidence strengthened Bolivia's contention, later to be presented at the Twelfth Organization of American States Meeting of Consultation on Foreign Ministers, that the insurrection was inspired by Cuba. In late August and again in late September, the guerrillas suffered significant defeats and lost several of their principal foreign and Bolivian leaders. The final blow came shortly after the US-trained 2nd Ranger Battalion was committed to the guerrilla zone when, on October 8, "Che" Guevara and several other guerrillas fell in battle. The remnants of the band are now reportedly trying to break out of the area and escape.

There are several reasons for the guerrillas' defeat. They apparently were wedded to the thesis outlined in Debray's Revolution Within the Revolution? that the movement must be rural based, that formal association with the local communist parties is to be avoided, and that the cooperation of the local campesinos must be won. The failure of the campesinos, conservative by nature, to

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support the movement actively was critical. The lack of meaningful coordination with the communist parties or other dissident elements (e.g., the miners, the students, the urban labor unions) precluded the possibility of opening other rural or urban fronts which could have seriously strained the government's limited capabilities to deal with the situation. And the fact that the group was foreign-led not only created resentment among the Bolivian communist parties but allowed the Barrientos regime to play on Bolivian nationalism and picture the movement as an aggressive adventure by the Cuban Government. Isolated and without campesino support, the movement was doomed to defeat at the hands of the inferior in quality but numerically superior Bolivian army.

The Bolivian Government and military are currently enjoying a rare period of self-confidence and pride--even they were surprised at their success. Barrientos' domestic position has been strengthened, although the revitalized military, proud of its first major military success in memory, may be somewhat less subject to presidential control. Still, the basic economic, political and social problems that make communist-led insurrection possible continue to exist. A new movement, perhaps under the banner of a martyred "Che" Guevara, but adopting tactics more suitable to the Bolivian situation, cannot be ruled out.

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